

Fast-Growth Partisans Out of Touch in Montgomery

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By Councilmember Marilyn Praisner

Not so long ago, a poll of Montgomery County residents revealed how they felt about growth. Only one percent said the County should grow faster. You wouldn't know it from the recent vote by a majority of County Councilmembers who approved a new Annual Growth Policy (AGP) that gives developers a green light, even where roads and schools can't handle more growth.

This new growth policy threw out the only serious test we had to determine where the County could accommodate more growth and where it could not. Instead the policy tightens the local intersection congestion test despite concerns expressed by the Planning Board staff that such an approach may not be as effective. It also strengthens the schools test, but not nearly enough.

Along with this policy, the Council increased existing impact tax fees and adopted new ones that developers must pay before they build – a similar approach used by the old Pay and Go, which an earlier Council threw out because it allowed growth to go ahead, even where there was simply no way to accommodate it. Call this Pay and Go, version 2.003. I oppose it.

Folks, we're already in a deep deficit when it comes to roads and schools. This new growth policy is only going to push us further into the hole. This same message came across loud and clear from the Montgomery County Planning Board. They told the Council this new policy will not stop *any* growth. Development will go forward, yet the roads and schools needed now and to support that growth will take much longer to build.

Do we need impact taxes? Definitely. In fact, I pressed the Council to adopt higher impact taxes last spring, but the Council majority balked, saying that such taxes must be tied to the growth policy. Bunk. If these new impact taxes are the panacea they claim, the Council should have enacted them six months ago. When I proposed delaying the new growth policy for six months (until July, 2004) to give the Planning Board a chance to develop an alternative to the current policy area test, the Council majority rejected this chance to look at how to improve our current growth policy, saying a delay would be ill-advised. Yet, they turned around and voted to delay the effective date of their new "policy." You have to ask, why? Who benefits?

Let's be clear. For too long development in this County has not paid for the increased strain it has placed on our roads and schools, and now we need significant infusions of cash to meet the challenge. But the \$44 million in anticipated revenue from the new impact taxes pales in comparison to the gains that developers realize under the new set of tests imposed by the Council. To offer some perspective, today, a new high school costs roughly \$40 million. We need to catch up on schools. Under the school's test I proposed, four school clusters would be placed in moratorium. Under the new policy, none will be. The result: congested hallways and crowded roads.

I agree with the Planning Board – our non-political experts – that we not only need higher impact taxes on developers, but *a/so* need meaningful controls on growth if we are ever going to see our roads and schools “catch up” with development.

That's not a “no-growth” policy. It's not even a “slow growth” policy. Let's call it the “slow-down-so-we-can-catch-up” policy. And that's where the overwhelming majority of Montgomery County residents come down in this debate.

Those Councilmembers who voted for the new Annual Growth Policy ran for office promising to “end gridlock.” Instead they gave a green light to developers, telling us that faster growth (more cars on the roads, more kids in the classrooms) will not only pay for itself but get us out of the current mess we are in and, by the way, provide us with much-needed affordable housing. Common sense tells us otherwise. Affordable housing is a complex issue that can't be solved by allowing developers to add a few affordable units into their higher-density projects. So once again, taxpayers end up footing the bill and suffering the consequences.

As I said during the debate on the measure, the Council approved a policy that is a gift to developers, a booby prize for County residents, and “Endless Gridlock” for as far as the eye can see. The Council majority has delivered for the one percent of Montgomery County residents who think the County is growing too *slowly*. When is it going to start listening to the other 99 percent of us?

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